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Naked Partisans

By Rod Paige

I have a message for the NAACP's Julian Bond and Kweisi Mfume, who have accused black conservatives of being the "puppets" of white people, unable to think for ourselves: You do not own, and you are not the arbiters of, African-American authenticity.

I am a lifelong member of the NAACP. I have a great respect for the organization. Its historical leaders, all visionary thinkers, have been responsible for helping to advance the struggle of African Americans over the past century, making our nation a more equitable and race-blind society. Sadly, the current NAACP leadership has managed to take a proud, effective organization in a totally new direction: naked partisan politics, pure and simple.

In particular, Mr. Bond and Mr. Mfume have done a great disservice to our organization, and to the founders of the civil-rights movement, with their hateful and untruthful rhetoric about Republicans and President Bush. How ironic that they would direct this vitriol at a president who has appointed more African Americans to high-profile posts, has committed more funds to fight AIDS in Africa, has championed minority homeownership, and has supported more trade and aid for African and Caribbean nations than any other administration.

Another idea that has been opposed in knee-jerk fashion is the No Child Left Behind Act. The law, passed in 2001 and one of the president's first priorities upon taking office, is improving the entire American school system and is giving parents whose children are trapped in underperforming schools not only hope, but options, such as free tutoring or transfer to a better public school. The NAACP's opposition to this law has left me scratching my head, given the civil-rights roots of the organization. Education is truly the civil-rights issue of the 21st century. If a child is denied a quality education, his or her future is dimmed by ignorance, indifference, callousness and disregard. Millions of children have been pushed through the school system in years past with little regard as to whether they have learned.

For minority students in particular, the denial of a quality education begins with what President Bush has termed the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Like Ralph Ellison's "invisible man," these children have been overlooked and thrust into the shadows. They supposedly cannot learn because they are too slow, come from disadvantaged homes, have the wrong skin color or are learning English. Excuses all.

School should be a leg up on life, which is why No Child Left Behind is designed to provide a quality education to all children, regardless of their race, spoken accent or street address. How a civil-rights organization could characterize NCLB as "disproportionately hurting" African-American children is mindboggling, since it is specifically designed to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

By the time African-American students reach 8th grade, only 12% can read proficiently and only 7% are proficient in math. Or, as education researchers have put it, the average black high-school senior is leaving 12th grade with 8th-grade skills. We know they can learn. Now we must educate.

Although the NAACP says it is committed to erasing this pernicious achievement gap, has it put its money where its mouth is? No Child Left Behind is the most aggressive attempt to attack this problem to date, and it is the law. Yet, the NAACP would prefer to attack it merely because of its origins in the Bush administration. How sad for black children everywhere.

Has the NAACP forgotten the pantheon of civil-rights leaders who understood that education was the key to advancement? Benjamin Elijah Mays, the mentor of Martin Luther King, once said that "black power must mean hard work, trained minds, and perfected skills to perform in a competitive society. The injustices imposed upon the black man for centuries make it all the more obligatory that he develop himself." Fifty years ago, the NAACP's Thurgood Marshall made the oral argument before the Supreme Court in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case that outlawed racial segregation in school. He said that "nothing can repay" wasted years and a lost education. I agree. I also agree with Mr. Bond that we still have two school systems in this country: one that serves children well and the other that hasn't. I have been saying the same thing for a long time.

The answer to this problem is to ensure that schools focus on the needs of the children first, not the "system." That's what NCLB is about. The president's steadfast support of the law, along with his creation of the first federally funded choice program targeting low-income families, demonstrates his belief that poor and minority parents deserve the same school choices as better-off parents who have the means to vote with their wallets and feet.

Through his education policies alone, President Bush has done more for the African-American community than any previous president, including the so-called "first black president," Bill Clinton. That's a secret some black leaders may not want millions of African-American voters to know. But just ask the tens of thousands of parents who took advantage of the free choice and tutoring provisions under the first year of NCLB, the majority of whom were minorities. Poll after poll has shown that African-American parents support school choice, which is directly at odds with the NAACP's position on the issue.

The corrosive rhetoric espoused by the NAACP may make headlines and get out the vote in some quarters, but it is counterproductive, damaging and a betrayal of the organization's own origins. I would think our community would be better off looking toward the future, helping our children live up to their potential. The civil-rights movement has historically been multicultural, and many of its founders, including those who established the NAACP, were in fact white. I long for the day when our nation's education policy will not be grist for the partisan mill -- when we can work together, black and white, rich and poor, for the sake of our children and for their future.

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